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HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF JAPANESE FOREIGN RELATIONS

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## HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF JAPANESE FOREIGN RELATIONS

Perhaps the most formative period in modern Japanese foreign relations was the latter part of the 19th Century, when the nation's self-imposed isolation was rudely ended by the forceful intrusion of the Western Powers. Their unwelcome presence in the region provided the Japanese with a thoroughly convincing demonstration of their own ignorance and inferiority to the more advanced Western World. Humiliated by this experience and unwilling to remain indefinitely subordinate to any foreign political and cultural influence, the Japanese quickly resolved to thoroughly modernize their society within the framework of traditional Japanese culture and regain national honor by restoring a more equitable balance of power with the Western imperialists. This was to be achieved through the pursuit of several basic objectives: revocation of the unequal treaties; security of the nation from foreign attack or encroachment; political, military, and economic equality with the West; recognition by the West as a full equal. The first objective was achieved by the turn of the century, while the latter three have continued to dominate and govern Japanese foreign relations for the past hundred years.

The initial strategy for achieving these objectives was economic growth and development, which was considered basic to any future development of political or military power. This strategy was also considered advantageous because it involved a low-risk factor in terms of avoiding conflict with the Western Powers, it capitalized on the nation's strengths, and it compensated for its weaknesses. Moreover, it seemed to be the most practical and

effective method for achieving a degree of equality with the West, abolishing unequal treaties, and diverting national interest from overseas adventures.

However this attempt to divert national attention and energies to more peaceful pursuits succeeded only for a time. By the early 1870s there was already significant pressure for a campaign in Korea, pressure so great that it was overcome only after a major political crisis in the national Government. This settled the issue for the next twenty years until growing prosperity, increasing nationalism, concern over national security, and strong resentment against the Western Powers combined to force the Government in the 1890s to assume a more active role in Asian affairs.

Economic growth in the meantime had been substantial. Japan was first introduced to the railroad, the telegraph, even the game of baseball during this time as part of the effort by the nation's leadership to adopt the best to be found in the Western world. Agriculture still remained the basic occupation of most of the population, but industrialization progressed significantly with the direct support and assistance of the central Government. This official intervention and subsidization of the industrialization process was indispensable since the relatively small merchant class clearly lacked the funds to finance the needed industrial plant. Within twenty years or so, however, the Government was financially exhausted by its responsibilities in this area and gradually began to dispose of its industrial assets to a new class of wealthy entrepreneurs who had emerged in the interim since the fall of the Tokugawa. Prominent among this group was the Mitsui family, one of the few great merchant

families of the Tokugawa period, and a former Tosa samurai, Iwasaki Yataro, who founded the house of Mitsubishi. These and other members of the group continued to develop the industrial capabilities of the nation and began to develop the production capacity for the manufacture of armaments; a sector of the economy which first experienced major growth during the last decade of the century, in the period spanning the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars.

Progress in economic development was paralleled, and to a certain extent resulted in increasing nationalistic feeling among the influential factions in the elite class, which inevitably created even greater pressures on the Government to become more active internationally. In the ensuing debate over foreign policy, the various alternatives considered would not have been entirely unfamiliar to a Japanese politician of the present day. One example of the discussion at the time was an essay entitled, "Three Drunkards' Discussion on National Government," written in 1887:

The drunkards represent three divergent views on national affairs. One asserts an outright expansionism; Japan should attack China, capture its rich resources, and use them to achieve military and economic strength. The second takes the opposite view; Japan should curtail its armament, persist in a peaceful policy, and concentrate its energy internally, in order to create a truly democratic country. The third view is a compromise between the two; the nation should tread a cautious path, realistically responding to each developing situation, with a view ultimately to creating a constitutional regime at home. One factor common to all three viewpoints is the absence of a moralistic picture of international politics. They differ on how Japan should behave in an immoral world, not on whether the world is immoral or not. Some would stand aloof from it, others would actively join the game, while still others would take an opportunistic course. The third was obviously the policy followed by

the government, and the other two may be considered reactions to official policy. Though they are diametrically opposed to each other, they share the belief that Japan should act independently of other countries, instead of timidly following their lead.\*

While the Government favored the more cautious and pragmatic approach, it was also convinced that any effective policy would have to dissociate Japan from Asia and create the image of a Japan more accustomed to following Western patterns of action. As long as Japan was considered a typical Asian nation, the Japanese leadership was convinced that the nation would continue to be regarded as backward, cruel, superstitious and weak by the Western Powers. Accordingly, the Japanese decided that they would have to adopt an attitude similar to that of the Western Powers in dealing with the Asian states and join the Western Powers in seeking colonial empire on the Chinese mainland. To an extent, this was only the rationalization of a traditional desire (evidenced throughout Japanese history, but particularly in the 1870s, as noted above) for hegemony over certain areas of the Chinese mainland, such as Korea and Manchuria, as a guarantee of Japanese national security. It was also indicative of Japan's growing self-confidence in its ability to restore a more satisfactory balance of power with the Western nations. In fact, from the very beginning of Western expansion into the Far East, the Japanese had resolved, perhaps unwittingly at first, to rid the region of the Western Powers or at least to

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\* Akira Iriye, Across the Pacific, New York, 1967. Pp 67-68.

equalize the balance of power. These motivations were quite basic to a people oriented to a hierarchical view of domestic and international society, and driven by an irresistible urge to occupy a superior, indeed a dominant, position in the region. Masao Murayama of Tokyo University attributes this Japanese characteristic to what he describes as the "transfer of oppression".

With the emergence of our country on the world stage the principle of 'transfer of oppression' was extended to the international plane. This can be seen in the campaign in favour of invading Korea, which flared up directly after the Restoration, and in the subsequent dispatch of troops to Formosa. Since the latter part of the Tokugawa Period Japan had never ceased to be conscious of the close and heavy pressure of the Great Powers, and as soon as the country was unified it used its new strength to stage a small-scale imitation of Western imperialism. Just as Japan was subject to pressure from the Great Powers, so she would apply pressure to still weaker countries--a clear case of the transfer psychology....

Within Japan the standard of values is relative proximity to the central entity; by extending this logic to cover the entire world, the ultra-nationalists engendered a policy of 'causing all the nations to occupy their respective positions (vis-a-vis Japan)'. Japan, 'the suzerain country', placed each other country in an order that was based on social status. Once this order was secured there would be peace throughout the world. As one ultra-nationalist writer expressed it, 'The meaning of world history is that the august virtue of His Majesty should shine on all the nations of the world. This will indubitably be accomplished as a manifestation of the martial virtues of the Empire.'

In such a scheme, where everything is based on the idea of an absolute central entity, there is no room for a concept like international law, which is equally binding on all nations....

The fact of being 'coeval with heaven and earth' guaranteed the indefinite expansion of the range in which the ultimate value was valid, and conversely the expansion of the 'martial virtues of the Empire' reinforced the absolute nature of the central value. This process spiralled upwards from the time of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, through the China Incident and until the Pacific War. August 15, 1945, the day that put a period to Japanese imperialism, was also the day when the 'national polity', which had been the foundation of the entire ultra-nationalist structure, lost its absolute quality.

Now for the first time the Japanese people, who until then had been mere objects, became free subjects and the destiny of this 'national polity' was committed to their own hands.\*

Initially the Japanese approach was relatively cautious and pragmatic, reflecting their desire to cooperate with the Western Powers and support the status quo. Implicit in such support was the assumption that Japan would be able to share in some of the benefits of imperialism, and would receive adequate recognition as an equal of the Western Powers. The Japanese felt they had earned such recognition by virtue of their impressive victories in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars. Yet they became increasingly discontented with the reaction of the Western Powers, especially after the war with Russia in 1904-05. The Western Powers, it was felt, refused to accept Japan as an equal even though Japan had conscientiously played the game strictly by the rules.

Much of the blame for Japan's frustrations was attributed to the United States, even though the Soviet Union was still considered the nation's most probable enemy. The reasons included growing racial tension on the West Coast against further Japanese immigration and a U.S. policy in China that was regarded in Tokyo as unfair and unjustified. Since the United States had assumed control of the major Pacific islands--notably Hawaii, Wake, Guam, and the Philippines--without challenge from Japan, the Japanese felt the United States should

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\* Masao Murayama, Thought and Behavior in Modern Japanese Politics, Oxford University Press, London, 1973. Pp 18, 20-21

reciprocate by not interfering in Japan's expansionist efforts on the Mainland. Whatever the merits of that argument, political tensions continued to increase despite rapidly growing economic ties between the two nations. By the second decade of the new century, for example, roughly one-third of Japan's exports were being shipped to the United States while at the same time American finance capital was becoming a major factor in the Japanese economy. In subsequent years, bilateral economic relations continued to be strong, but clearly not strong enough to counteract increasing political differences. Indeed the conflict between the political and economic interests of the two nations was to remain a prominent characteristic of the relationship until the outbreak of war.

These growing differences with the United States and other Western Powers created new uncertainty in Japan about a viable national security policy. A minority began to question the value of great power status for Japan and recommend a more passive foreign policy. One Japanese political writer of the time is reported by Akira Iriye to have argued as follows:

The stronger Japan grew, the greater would be its sense of insecurity because of the increased suspicion of Japan by other nations. The only way for the Japanese to find true security and contentment was to renounce expansionism and devote themselves to the cause of peace.\*

Nevertheless the majority as represented by the Japanese leadership were unwilling to modify Japan's basic foreign policy objectives.

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\*Iriye, p. 113



Before 1912 few visualized direct confrontation with the United States in China. Russia remained the most likely enemy in Japanese strategy. For the civilian government in Tokyo, Japanese-American relations were still primarily economic. America was an ever-expanding market for Japanese silks and an increasingly important supplier of capital. Nevertheless, there steadily grew an awareness that the policies of the two countries might not be entirely compatible in Asia. To a nation already bewildered by racial prejudice abroad and inclined to a defensive pan-Asianism, American policy in China seemed all the more to confirm the fear of Japanese-American conflict. The United States seemed more and more interested in championing China's cause against Japan. As a writer put it, 'China today is trying to use America...If the situation continues, there will develop a crisis between the United States and China on one hand and Japan on the other...Japan should naturally insist on the status quo, based on its legal and treaty rights.'\*

The Japanese military was so committed to this viewpoint that it began drafting the first contingency plans for a possible future naval conflict with the United States before 1910. These efforts were intensified with the outbreak of World War I and then subsequently the Russian Revolution since the military believed that both events would force the Russians and the European Powers to concentrate on higher priority issues closer to home. This would leave only the United States with the political interest or the military power to oppose Japanese efforts in China.

A contrasting viewpoint could be found among the Japanese political leadership which continued to hope that an acceptable political reconciliation with the United States on the China Problem could still be achieved. Yet over a period of time

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\*Iriye, p. 117

extending into the Thirties, the Japanese leadership gradually persuaded itself that the United States, in particular, and the Western Powers, in general, were not prepared to accept Japan as an equal or to recognize what Japan considered its vital interests on the Chinese Mainland. Given this intolerable situation, the Japanese reluctantly concluded that their nation had no alternative but to proceed alone in China.

The fate of China itself was never of great importance to the Japanese-American dispute except as it affected the balance of power in the Pacific. Before the late Twenties and early Thirties, in fact, the United States had never committed itself politically to any of the Chinese factions, nor had it indicated any consistently strong desire to help restore political stability in the country. U.S. interests in China were basically commercial and its diplomatic policy was consequently oriented to protecting American economic interests and preventing any other Power from gaining a dominant position that would threaten these interests or undermine the existing status quo. U.S. strategic interests in China were served equally well by this policy. A stable balance of power in which no other nation held a superior or dominant position on the Mainland was considered absolutely essential to the security of the Philippines and other American island possessions. Japan's effort to expand its presence on the Mainland was therefore considered a direct threat to the U.S. position in the Pacific and the prevailing balance of power. Yet Japan was equally insistent that its security could not be assured until its presence on the Mainland was sufficiently strong to prevent any other Power from using

China as a base for threatening the Japanese islands. As the period between the outbreak of World War I and the attack on Pearl Harbor demonstrated, the dispute could only be resolved by war.

The possibility of armed conflict with Japan was not entirely unforeseen by the U.S. military. The first reference in U.S. naval writings to Japan as a potential naval rival dates back to the turn of the century, while the first contingency plans for a war with Japan were drafted shortly after the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 or about the same time similar plans were being drafted in Tokyo. There were several other interesting parallels between the two countries. Both had become major factors in the Pacific about the same time. Japan in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and the United States with the acquisition of the Philippines in 1898. Both were also relative newcomers to the game of power politics but equally interested for differing reasons in expanding their international presence and influence. Since both nations concentrated their activities in the Pacific, a conflict of interests was practically inevitable--especially after the European Powers and Russia became increasingly preoccupied with their own domestic and regional problems. The active presence of these powers in China had been the foundation of the balance of power for the region, but their diversion elsewhere created the necessary conditions for a direct confrontation between the Japanese and the Americans.

The confrontation ultimately erupted into war, for a number of reasons basic to the Japanese national character. A major factor was Japan's profound sense of insecurity which had been

rules. Yet it is also true that Japanese foreign policy was both paranoid and schizophrenic.

On one level, the Japanese were pursuing what they considered to be a moderate policy in China, while on another level it can be argued that their pervasive insecurity propelled them into two wars within the period of a decade, as well as frequent confrontations with the other imperialist Powers. For a significant period of time, these two divergent, contradictory impulses were kept under control--to an extent by uncertainty and insecurity--until inevitably the internal tensions reached the point where a definitive choice became unavoidable. To the Japanese, the orientation to a more aggressive policy was justified by the injustice and unfairness of the West in its relations with Japan. National honor and self-respect had suffered as a result, the Japanese maintained, and that was clearly the critical issue to them.

Rarely, however, did the Japanese concede their own mistakes or recognize the fundamental problem created by their self-centered attitude towards international relations. But then again, how could they? They were so obsessed with their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities that there was no incentive or opportunity to develop beyond a tribalistic approach towards the rest of the world in which every relationship could only be seen in terms of "we" and "they".

In commenting on some of these same aspects of the Japanese national psychology, Ruth Benedict has written:

For in Japan the constant goal is honor. It is necessary to command respect. The means one uses to that end are tools one takes up and then lays aside as cir-

cumstances dictate. When situations change, the Japanese can change their bearings and set themselves on a new course. Changing does not appear to them the moral issue that it does to Westerners....

The Japanese derive their aggression in a different way. They need terribly to be respected in the world. They saw that military might had earned great respect for great nations and they embarked on a course to equal them. They had to out-Herod Herod because their resources were slight and their technology was primitive. When they failed in their great effort it meant to them that aggression was not the road to honor after all. Giri had always meant equally the use of aggression or the observance of respect relations, and in defeat the Japanese turned from one to the other, apparently with no sense of psychic violence to themselves. The goal is still their good name....

At present the Japanese know militarism as a light that failed. They will watch to see whether it has also failed in other nations of the world. If it has not, Japan can relight her own warlike ardor and show how well she can contribute. If it has failed elsewhere, Japan can set herself to prove how well she has learned the lesson that imperialistic dynastic enterprises are no road to honor.\*

There are several other observations suggested by this overview of Japanese foreign relations prior to World War II. The Japanese have traditionally tried to compete with the West in the economic and commercial sector in the belief that this was the one area where their prospects were best for achieving equality with the West. The emphasis on economic development in recent years is consistent with that pattern and exemplifies the national compulsion to compensate for a sense of insecurity through extraordinary accomplishment. It is also indicative of Japan's unusual ability to shift tactics without guilt or embarrassment in the pursuit of national honor and respectability.

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\* Ruth Benedict, The Chrysanthemum and the Sword, Meridian Book Edition, New York, 1971. Pp. 171, 173, 316.

Thus when the policy of military expansionism utterly failed, the nation smoothly reverted to its initial strategy of competing with the West on economic terms. The same process occurred when the Japanese shifted from an ostensible policy of cooperating with the Western Powers to a policy of independent, often radical action. One other aspect of Japan's economic development worthy of note is that the precedent for extensive government involvement in the economy dates back to the Meiji period and as such represents a continuation of a hundred-year-old tradition.

In reviewing the foreign policy debates that occurred in Japan between 1880-1920, the striking similarity of those debates to contemporary discussion in Japan is readily apparent. This is especially true as the open discussion of conventional and nuclear rearmament becomes more common in Japan today. What this seems to suggest is that uncertainty still prevails in Japan today--as it did in the earlier days--on an effective foreign policy and that the nation is likely to continue experimenting and exploring alternative policies. It also seems to suggest that in the past hundred years, Japan has yet to develop a basic policy that would satisfy its need for national honor and international status while calming its anxieties and fears.. Indeed this overview of Japanese foreign policy makes it apparent that Japan has never been at peace with itself or its neighbors in terms of its foreign policy--a condition which seems to have persisted to the present day. One consequence of this is that Japan has traditionally preferred to operate alone, with only temporary alliances with other Powers, precisely because of its historic inability to develop a foreign policy that would encourage stable relations with other nations.

to move cautiously. They are far more vulnerable today to any radical disruptions of their foreign political-economic relationships than ever before. Moreover, the Japanese are beginning to gain a greater appreciation of their vulnerability as a result of the growing economic nationalism in such important supplier countries as Australia and Thailand and in such major markets as Europe and the United States.

One response to this trend as well as to the increasing domestic problems of the country has been a more serious consideration of the advantages of moderating Japan's economic growth in order to reduce the nation's dependence on foreign trade and gain time to attack many of the nation's chronic urban problems. This is somewhat in contrast to previous prevailing patterns of action. When faced with opposition in the past, Japan has felt compelled to pursue its objectives even more forcefully and directly than before. But whether that is a serious possibility in the future is one of many questions that will be explored in detail in subsequent papers for this project.

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C.A.A.